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THE
SONNETEERING OF
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CHICAGO
WALTER M. HILL
MCMXXI

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Hark!

As little "Wolferl" through old Salzburg straying
And clambering some spidery stair, mistaken
For his good father's, may have found forsaken
A spinet in the dusty loft decaying,
And with his baby hands to sweet obeying
Charmed the stiff, yellow keys so long unshaken
By touch of fingers, may have made awaken
Its night-numbered song to sun-rise of his playing,

So now a master greater than Mozart,
Of melody and harmony the lord,
Would turn the musings of my inmost elf
To singing strings, and of my antique heart
Fashion a quaintly jangling harpsichord
To play his welcome to the Dawn, yourself.

July Night

The ravelled veils of salmon cloud forsake
A sky of peacock blue, as fireflies
With gay, inconstant mimic improvise
A Milky Way along the bluff. A flake
Of late syringa, eager to o'er take
Its fellow, falls, and on the warm grass lies
In invitation. Now the moon will rise,
Like a great golden galleon, from the lake.

Up in the dark tree tops a fainting breath
Stirs waxen leaves; below, as soft as death,
Only the moth wings flutter. Now my hand
Reaches for yours, and does not understand
Its absence, which can turn so cruelly
All summer's opulence to beggary.

Memories of Greece

From Lycobettos still, in memory,
I can look out above the evening mist
Beyond th' Acropolis where yet persist
Th' immortal violets, and farther see,
Past Corinth's gulf of lapis-lazuli,
Great Erymanthus, like a Titan's fist
Clenched in a glove of deepening amethyst,
Cellene, wrapt in purple dignity.

Since then have many travellers from that slope
Watched the warm colours die on Argolis.
Not one remembers better! without hope
I always hoped to know again in this
Plain world that perfect scene. After long wait,
I see it in your eyes, regenerate.

Vistas

Oh for some island, far enough to balk
The curious voyager, where hours and days
And months pass cloudlessly, whose shimmering bays
No anchor ripples; only sea birds walk
Its sunny sands. Above it nightly stalk
Achernar and Canopus, and their rays
Silver its beaches. Silence there betrays
Secrets too deep ever to rise in talk.

In such a paradise, with years to spend,
I might pursue each vista, and explore
The country of your heart to its last shore
And highest hill, but know that at the end
There still would lie in hiding from your lover
Some new delight for him to yet discover.

Long After "the Prince of Poets"

I can not hope, like laurel-crowned Petrarch,
To give my love six centuries of fame,
Or weave such magic romance 'round your name
As he did, when he lit against the dark
Of sleeping ages, like a little spark,
The song which burst into a deathless flame.
My flint I strike with high and eager aim,
But know that few its tiny flash may mark.

Enough for me, if, when keen, frosty age
O'er takes you on your mortal pilgrimage
And drives you to seek solace by the fire,
You then take down this little book, desire
To warm yourself by dear, remembered times
And, glad I loved you, softly croon my rhymes.

Sun-rising

Alone tonight by light of candle lean
I dream how somewhere now the sun is making
Anew the day, his tangent radiance flaking
A silver sea with golden damascene,
Or how above deep valleys' darkling green
Some snowy-cheeked, unclouded peak is breaking
Into high flame, when lover-like awaking
Startles to rose her virginal demesne.

And I muse on how Love's sun freshly rising
Ever discovers oceans unexplored,
Or Himalayan mountain chains, surprising
Reluctant beauty in their fastness stored:
With each advancing day he finds unfurled
Some fairer landscape of your heart, my world.

Midsummer Nights Dream

Such a night sings! Some Lydian shepherd's song
Is by the milky moonlight softly trilled
'Neath tall black trees in gray-green shadows filled
With errant satellites, now led awrong
From pale, moon-banished stars. The lawn along
An over-flow of Heaven has been spilled
In stillest beauty, from which Love's distilled
His ancient melody,—sweet, sanguine, strong.

Such a night sings, and asks for audience
No harking of the scholar's hand-cupped ear
That analyses sound but song can't hear,
Nor worldling's glib, impertinent pretense.
It wants but lovers, so I pray that we
May be sometime its close-clasped auditry.

Wood-gods

Old books reveal that the deep woods near Trèves
Long challenged Christ. No zealot might disbark
On missionary quest beyond that mark.

Diana's followers there sought to brave
The Syrian cult, and in their secret nave
Of moss-stained oaks, 'till days of Joan of Arc,
They flashed like fireflies in the early dark,
Or sunny rocks against a smileless wave.

Along the Chinese rivers travellers tell
How the wind-worn, time-twisted trees are spared
Since in their trunks ancestral spirits dwell,
As in the grove about my house seems snared
Some pagan protestant, who makes renew
Each starry night my worshipping of you.

Al Fresco

Crisp as cut stone, or vague as faint perfume,
Fantastic clouds like Chinese creatures old
And fabulous, on screens of lemon gold,
People the changing sky. The drooping plume
Of one tall elm nods darkly at the room
Rimpling above it. From the western wold
The tentacles of mounting mists uphold
Earth's plan to swallow heaven in its gloom.

Before this is a spacious table set
With creamy cloth, silver, wine-gilded glass
And candles flickering as the whispers pass
From field to lake. All is inviting, yet
Without your smile to crown the carnival,
My eyes see only Laughter's funeral.

To My Stone St. Hilarion

You were, perhaps, carved for some straitened nook
In a steep arch, above the human taint
Entering beneath you. There your mute complaint
Of Earth's misuse, your prayer-pinched, tear-smeared look
Summoned old sinners to the bell and book,
Inviting all to that immense constraint
Which seared your brow, proclaiming you a saint
Who knew all sin and each glad sin forsook.

Pupil you were of Anthony, men say,
The Anthony who frowned all loving down,
To his eternal, damnable renown.
For your apostasy I gladly pay
Ransom in flowers, trusting now you'll be
A lover's saint, new-born in charity.

Orion

Confessed a comrade of the year's old age,
A tardy tippler at the starry feast,
Ruddy Orion staggers up the east,
And, shaking off a summer's villainage,
Again assumes his wintry heritage.
Aldebaran and Altair have increased
Their light to lend him honour, and the least,
Last comet owns his silent seignorage.

Far-flaming stars, like satrap satellites,
In vasty space of crystal vacancy,
Make court before his august empery,
Whose sudden sun-burst lightens and benights
The rest of heaven, as for me your star
Dark-lights the world, Love's final avatar.

Parthenos

Sometimes I wonder if the Parthenon
Was just so perfect when it sparkled new,
Fresh from the Phidian mallet, when withdrew
First from its side the builders' skeleton
And bade astonished Athens look upon
Its bright-hued splendour.—Now the winds imbrue
Its beauty with eternity, the dew
Paints it more perfect,—dew and Attic sun.

As kindly Time rounds the too rigid line
Of squared foundation, sharply chiselled plinth,
And warms to tenderness the chill above
Of pediment and fluted labyrinth,
So may your beauty on itself refine,
Perfection change for perfectness, through love.

November Chill

The wastrel wind scatters the legacies
Of golden August's richly-verdured nights
In soon-spent leaves; improvidently blights
The last unheeded asters; soon will freeze
The pools, deep-shadowed, which the panoplies
Of steely skies light from inverted heights,
Whence Rigel, prince of Autumn's proselytes,
Peers through the tangled rigging of the trees.

Half-numb I am. No spoil of fruitful garth,
Doubly-distilled, nor fraud of fond romance,
No noisy hickory snapping on the hearth
From creeping cold vouchsafes deliverance,
'Till your far face recalled my blood unchains
And wakes the summer sleeping in my veins.

Small Pence

If I could coin my heart's full treasury
Into the counters which are common pay,
Or if the world's exchequer would assay
The honest bullion of my sympathy,
And try the riches of my poverty
With test of acid, ring, and bite and weigh
With every scale that shortage might betray,
I know that it must pass that currency.

But my dull mind seems powerless to make
The gold to guilders, or to press imprint
Of face unless on farthings, is no mint
To stamp my love in ducats, so, dear, take
These crude, clipped coppers of my blunted wit,
And know, at least, they are not counterfeit.

Day-break

This morning through my graying windows blow
Winds from the woods, my drowsy forehead stroking
With damp caresses from a forest smoking
In exhalations of the melted snow.

Down gurgling spouts and sobbing gutters flow
Streams to a dream of summer brooks provoking,
And from some misty distance comes the croaking
And querulous complaint of brother crow.

'Tis winter yet! A mind so long discreet,
Incredulous, by February thaw
Or crow's profane, anachronistic caw
Surely should not be tricked, but since, my Sweet,
The thought of you dawns on me with the day,
In brownest buds I see the bloom of May.

Ronsard

I can not think he was but chanticleer,
Crowing the easy conquests of a court
In careless stanzas, chanted half in sport
And half in hope his flattery might endear
To arching brows their facile sonneteer.
Rather I mark the vital soul's import,
Grave 'neath the smiles, too candid to distort
To a mere elegance his mood sincere.

So I have called him master and have sung
My fondest songs feigning to follow him,
And longing that my plaintive lips might limn
My love in some faint echo of his tongue.
Taut are the strings and tuneful of my heart,
Could I but pluck them with the master's art.

On a Twelfth Century Missal

No creature of a papal chancery,
To drudgery conventual dismissed,
Conceived these characters, no copyist
Flourished so freely and so legibly
These Latin lines of round calligraphy:
Rather some transcendental humanist,
In adoration raised to rhapsodist,
Here hymned the Virgin in his ecstasy.

Through Life's broad book he made his pilgrimage,
Swinging the censer of a heart whose scent
To Heaven rose from his still hermitage.
Oh! That to you my hermit heart's intent
May raise an incense from this studied page
Fragrant as his sweet-smelling sacrament.

Clearing

The wind grown hoarse with shouting thunderously
His savage song, and winding fanfares loud,
Falters at last in whispers. Now unbowed,
The regal oaks raise weary heads to see
What realm remains after the anarchy,
And stretch their arms, still unsubdued and proud,
Strongly to Heaven, across whose fields, storm-plowed,
Race the gray ranks of winter's cavalry.

The cloudy armies scatter fast and far,
The gusty sighs diminish, pause, and cease,
Clear in the east a solitary star
Signals the triumph and return of peace.
I know it for an omen to foretell
That lovers' skies shall clear of storms as well.

The Centaur—An Intaglio

How shepherds stared on the Thessalian plain,
When for one burnished moment, statue-still,
They saw you drinking at the drowsy rill!
A snort, a stamp, a startled toss of mane,
And you were gone, a dappled hurricane,
Crashing o'er asphodel and daffodil
Until among the laurels on the hill
Your quivering fact became a myth again.

'Twas Phœbus sired you and bade you be
Manlike in mischief, even excelling them,
And from your mother, Hebe, you'd no lack
Of license or of mad audacity.
Now do I find you prisoned in this gem,
Quite tamed, a tiny Eros on your back.

Finale

If I had sought to praise some other face
Not perfect so nor so with Love conspiring,
And if my hand, more temperate in desiring,
Had tried some lesser loveliness to trace,
Then from my pack of wordy commonplace
I might have drawn, meet for my mood's requiring,
Drab, homespun phrases for the plain attiring
Of any other but one lyric Grace.

But I have striven to pilfer from the birds
Their lilt, and from the stars I love so well
Their choired song, in hope with these to tell
A beauty past the portraiture of words.
And, having failed, I break the lute in two
That shall not sound, unless it honours you.

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